



NEWS from the Democrats

Committee on Resources

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**OPENING REMARKS OF U.S. REP. NICK J. RAHALL
RANKING DEMOCRAT - RESOURCES COMMITTEE
NATIONAL PARKS, RECREATION AND PUBLIC LANDS SUBCOMMITTEE
OVERSIGHT HEARING: NPS AND BLM BUDGET REQUESTS FOR FY 2005
FEBRUARY 26, 2004**

Mr. Chairman, the Bush Administration is in a bind. Year after year it sends budgets to Capitol Hill which gut resource protection programs and undermine our system of National Parks and Public Lands. And yet, while this position is wildly popular among the extractive industries, this level of disregard for our natural resource heritage does not sit well with the American people. So, in an attempt to destroy the environment while claiming to save it, the budget arrives festooned with flowery rhetoric designed to tell one story, while the actual numbers tell the truth.

This comes as no surprise from an Administration which claims cutting trees makes them "healthy" and deficit spending is "conservative," but this attempt to fool the public into thinking this budget is adequate ultimately must fail.

The Administration alleges that its budget fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This is simply not true. By law, only two programs, federal land acquisition and grants to states, are eligible to receive money from the Fund and each year \$900 million is credited into the Fund. It does not require a degree from Yale to grasp that anything less than \$900 million in expenditures for these two programs is not full funding of the LWCF.

The Bush budget includes only \$314 million, or about 35% of the authorized amount credited yearly for these two programs. President Bush may have thought that meeting 35% of his commitment to the Texas Air National Guard was sufficient but it is wholly insufficient as an investment in the protection of land, water and recreational resources in this country.

Similarly, this budget claims to be keeping the President's campaign pledge to erase the National Park Service's maintenance backlog. It does not. The funding levels requested for deferred maintenance under President Bush have shown only incremental increases over the levels provided by the previous Administration and have never approached the levels promised during the campaign. Given these repeated shortfalls, the Administration is on track to fall more than \$4 billion short of its \$5 billion campaign pledge. This would explain why a recently completed, internal assessment of the condition of NPS facilities concluded that the backlog of deferred maintenance has actually *increased* during the Bush Administration. To persist in claiming that the promise to erase the backlog is being kept is nonsense.

Our National Park system is at a crossroads. Fewer people are visiting the Parks. Many units have serious air and water quality issues, facilities are failing and wildlife populations are suffering. The Bush Administration's response to these challenges is to continually under fund our Parks, explore outsourcing our Park professionals, and consider further reductions in services. For the crown jewel of our National Park System, Yellowstone, the Bush plan includes increasing the strain on resources by forcing the Park to accommodate more snow machines than ever and to address wildlife management challenges by helping slaughter an American icon, the mighty bison.

For public lands, the situation is no better. The Bush Administration's notion of "multiple use" of public lands seems limited to the idea that we should either drill them, mine them, or graze them. Under the current Administration's policies and budget priorities for the public lands, the BLM should more appropriately be called the Bureau of Livestock and Mining. The Administration seems bent on kowtowing to ranchers and going to the well for oil and gas operators.

Over the past three years I have heard Interior Secretary Norton invoke her claim to public land management based on her 4 C's ("consultation, cooperation, and communication all in the service of conservation"). Those claims ring hollow if you are one of the many local governments or citizen organizations who happen to disagree with a Bush Administration policy or action, in which case you are either ignored or dismissed. It seems that her 4 C's apply only if you happen to agree with what the Administration is proposing to do. It is time for the Administration to release the grip that the commercial interests have on our public lands and return to management for the public good rather than the private sector bottom line.

The Administration's efforts to short-change our National Parks and public lands have become painfully obvious. Vital spending categories such as Land and Water Conservation Fund Programs and the maintenance backlog are receiving just pennies on the dollar. While these choices are within the President's prerogative, this Administration should have the courage of its convictions and be straight with

the American people regarding its blatantly irresponsible management practices. If our National Parks are not priorities, simply say so and move on. The American people are not fools and they will not long suffer being treated as if they are.